THE BUDDHIST WAY INTO TIBET

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1. Introduction

During the time of lHa-tho-tho-ri-gnyan-btsan the Tsinta-ma-ni’i-gzungs, the sPang-bkong-phyag-rgya-ma and other [books] fell from heaven and were worshipped. Because of this, the life-span of the king and that of the kingdom increased. This became known as the “Beginning of the Holy Doctrine”.¹

Thus ’Gos-lo-tsa-ba gZhon-nu-dpal, the author of the Tibetan chronicle Deb-ther-sngon-po, the “Blue Annals”, which he wrote in 1478 AD, starts his account about the humble beginnings of Buddhism in Tibet. The origins of Buddhism are put down to a mythical past intricately interwoven with the indigenous origin myths of the Tibetan people. Apart from this mythical encounter with the Buddhist doctrine, what historical evidence is there to establish reliable facts about the Buddhist way into Tibet, to re-tell the advent of the dharma in the land of snow?

There are not many but at least a few independent sources which the historian of religion can examine to get a more or less accurate account about the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. But first we have to consider the setting of the stage.

2. The Territory and Its Inhabitants

Which region do we mean when we speak of “Tibet”? Tibet in pre-modern times comprised a much larger territory than today’s Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), a part of China. The historic kingdom of Tibet at the height of its power in the seventh to ninth centuries covered a vast area, reaching from Northern China to Northern India. Dunhuang敦煌 on the Silk Road and Northern Yunnan雲南 were under Tibetan dominion, and even Western Central Asia felt the Tibetan military pressure. The very name “Tibet” bears witness to this

¹ Deb-ther-sngon-po, vol. 1, p. 63 (lines 14–17).
expansion of the Tibetan empire because it derives from the Arabian “Tubbat” by which the Arabs called the Tibetans whom they encountered in Western Central Asia during these centuries. The Tibetans call themselves bod-pa and their country bod, respectively bod-yul, a name which is already found in the Old Tibetan sources.

In the south the Tibetan empire of the royal period included Ladakh and parts of Nepal and Northern India. The frontiers of political Tibet have, however, together with the changing fortunes of its rulers, shifted over time. In later centuries ethnic Tibet included the area from the Easternmost Khams district to mNga’-ris in the west and Ding-ri in the south, near the Nepalese border. To the north stretched the vast expanse of the Byang-thang, the “Northern Plain”, as the region is called in Tibetan, which even today is sparsely inhabited by pastoral nomads, without permanent settlements.

For our purpose we will mainly concentrate on the provinces of dBus and gTsang, which together comprise Central Tibet, because these two central provinces provided the setting for the first encounter of the Tibetans with Buddhism. dBus and gTsang are considered to be the “heart” of Tibet, an image which is stressed in indigenous myth and confirmed in Buddhist ritual, as we shall later see.

The ethnic origins of the Tibetan people are still unknown. There is extensive evidence of racial diversity through the ages, the one exception being Eastern Tibet, where the people seem to have descended from the nomadic Qiang tribes who are attested to in Chinese sources as early as the third century AD and whose movements into the Tibetan plateau are carefully described in the Chinese records.

3. The Sources

The available Tibetan sources upon which I have based my presentation in this essay, can be divided into two main groups, each of them specified by (a) the date of origin and (b) the intention of the (sometimes unknown) authors. The first group consists of the so-called Dunhuang documents and the Old Tibetan inscriptions preserved on pillars and carved on stones in Lhasa and its vicinity. Some of the stone inscriptions were also written down in later literary sources of the second group, the so-called “religious histories” (chos-byung), or in works like the Mani-bka’-bum which contain much material from these early times. If we choose an emic way to classify the sources we can differentiate